

In 1917, spy target was black America

By Stephen G. Tompkins
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Lt. Col Ralph Van Deman created the Army's black spy network in 1917.

He continued to influence spying on American citizens until his death in 1952. The Commercial Appeal's review of intelligence files shows.

The spy system that would question the loyalties of black Americans for generations began May 3, 1917. That day, Secretary of War Newton D. Baker ordered Van Deman to crank up the department's sleepy Military Intelligence Division.

After declaring war on Germany, the United States needed an internal security network, and the Army would provide it. The Secret Service and the Justice Department's infant Bureau of Investigation were too small or inexperienced to handle the large counterespionage task.

Van Deman immediately set out to define which groups posed a serious threat to the country's security.

In a June 2, 1917, memo to Baker, he said the United States faced four principal domestic enemies: the International Workers of the World (IWW), a forerunner of the AFL-CIO bitterly opposed to the war; opponents of the draft; Socialists and "Negro Unrest."

Racial unrest and violence disgusted Van Deman, according to letters he wrote to his family while stationed in the Philippines in 1906.

His letters made special note of a riot by black soldiers in Brownsville, Texas, that left two white townspeople dead, plus riots in Atlanta in which two whites and 10 blacks were killed and five times that many were wounded, raped or tortured.

Similar violence erupted in 1917, and at MID, Van Deman was receiving reports of growing black militancy.

On July 24, a letter arrived from a group calling itself "The Black Nation": "The Germans has not done us any harm, and they cannot treat us any meaner

than you all has. Beware when you train 50,000 or 60,000 of the negro race."

In early July, race riots in East St. Louis, Ill., had resulted in the deaths of 39 blacks and nine whites and the callout of the Illinois National Guard to restore order. On July 30, in Waco, Texas, 20 black soldiers of the 24th Infantry clashed with local authorities, leaving one black soldier dead and several whites wounded.

On Aug. 2, Van Deman, then 52, walked into a small conference room in the Hooe Building in Washington and shared these reports with 10 MID staff members.

He told them to launch an immediate, comprehensive intelligence effort targeting black America.

In a memo to Baker nine days later, Van Deman declared that "German influence" was "at the bottom of Negro unrest."

He also predicted imminent "violence of a serious nature" among the nation's black population. On Aug. 23, black soldiers in Houston rioted, leaving 17 black troopers and white citizens dead.

Baker's special assistant, Emmett Scott, wrote Van Deman that black troops' anger over mistreatment had caused the violence.

But Van Deman ignored the explanation, as he would later efforts to dissuade him from his conviction that black dissent stemmed from foreign-backed subversion.

He turned his attention to the black church after receiving a memo Aug. 28 from Maj. Walter H. Loving, a black soldier on his staff.

Rev. Charles H. Williams, field secretary of the National Council of Churches, had told Loving no one was more influential in the black community than its ministers.



Ralph Van Deman

There is no known record of Van Deman's response, though he later told Maj. Fuller Potter, second in command of MID's Counterintelligence Police in New York: "The black church will always be a target of our enemies."

Van Deman, therefore, made the black church MID's target.

MID records show a constant concern over the loyalty of black churchgoers and leaders despite large public demonstrations of patriotism like the National Baptist Convention meeting that Army spies photographed on Oct. 24, 1918.

Van Deman's agents watched families that entertained troops, followed soldiers' girlfriends to determine their loyalty, watched hotels and listened to Sunday sermons in black churches.

Van Deman also widened his investigation, establishing MID branch offices in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, St. Louis, Salt Lake City, New Orleans, San Francisco and Los Angeles, laying the foundation for creation of 304 intelligence offices in the 1960s.

Van Deman and Loving began recruiting informers within the black community.

Robert R. Moton, Booker T. Washington's successor at Tuskegee Institute, came aboard, as did Dr. C. V. Roman of Nashville, who sent Loving a list of potential black informants and troublemakers in the Mid-South.

Loving wrote Van Deman on Nov. 23, 1917, that "Mr. Robert R. Church of Memphis, Tenn., who is one of the wealthiest men of the race, ... has put me in touch with one prominent colored man in each of the largest Southern cities."

Loving also tried to tell Van Deman that not all black dissent arose from German influence. In a Dec. 2, 1917, letter, Loving sent Van Deman a clip from The Commercial Appeal about Ligon

Scott, a black man burned at the stake by a mob after being accused of assaulting a Dyersburg, Tenn., woman.

"Is there not some way by which we may assure the colored people of that section that the government will take steps to bring to justice the perpetrators of this awful crime?" Loving asked.

But Van Deman wanted proof of subversion, not moral judgments.

He hired Joel E. Spingarn, the white board chairman of the NAACP, and made him a major in MID in May 1918.

Spingarn and black agent Lt. T. Montgomery Gregory ran a small unit of undercover agents, according to intelligence documents.

The documents show Spingarn, who remained NAACP chairman during his tenure at MID, used his post to obtain critical information for MID, such as a list of the organization's 32,000 members.

The NAACP gives an annual award named for Spingarn.

Opening private mail became second nature. During World War I, MID opened 100,000 pieces of mail a week and surreptitiously subscribed to more than 60 black publications.

Despite these efforts, Van Deman could not convince his superiors of a German-orchestrated black subversive movement.

But Luther Witzke helped change that in February 1918. Witzke, a German naval lieutenant, spy and saboteur, gave Van Deman proof that blacks were the country's Achilles heel.

Witzke and German spy Kurt A. Jahnke had been responsible for three bombings in the United States in 1916 and 1917 that killed at least 16 and caused millions of dollars in damage to military installations.

But in 1918, Witzke, Jahnke



FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover (right) and longtime aide Clyde A. Tolson arrive at the Supreme Court in July 1942.

and six other German agents were preparing to launch their most ambitious project from a base in Mexico.

"There is something terrible going to happen on the other side of the border when I get there," Witzke told Col. Paul Bernardo Altendorf, a 40-year-old native of Poland who served in the Mexican Army and helped MID spy on Germans in Mexico.

Altendorf helped Witzke cross the border at Nogales, Ariz., where Witzke was arrested.

His luggage, snatched from the Bowman Hotel on the Mexican side, contained coded messages and cipher tables, which Van Deman's cryptographers soon broke.

Those messages and other in-

formation developed through interrogating Witzke and others uncovered plans to begin a revolution in America.

Mines, factories, railroads, bridges, and telegraph and telephone systems were targeted for simultaneous

explosions. Weapons and explosives had been smuggled into designated sites by truck and submarine, according to court-martial records and MID documents.

Black British agent William Gleaves, who Witzke thought was on his side, testified at

Witzke's court-martial at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, on Aug. 16, 1918:

"I were to go and see the colored soldiers and the colored population . . . and explain what we were going to carry out, that we were going to carry out a revolution."

Gleaves said Witzke intended to bribe black soldiers not to interfere when white officers ordered them to suppress strikers that Witzke would organize to shut down vital industries.

Witzke confirmed that radical blacks had received weapons and that German agents "have hidden our explosives under colored homes and floorboards of colored churches."

This information hit the War Department and White House like German artillery.

Van Deman, sitting in his new seven-story headquarters at 15th and M Streets NW, immediately cabled MID offices nationwide to "make all efforts to uncover Negro subversion. . . . Weapons and explosives supplied by German agents are in this country."

Van Deman was given a free hand to eliminate the threat.

Army Intelligence historian John P. Finnegan said Van Deman's emphasis on domestic spy-

ing helped the nation avoid serious social, industrial and political disruption during World War I.

"The calmness of the American home front during World War I owed something to the fact that a good deal of time and effort was spent by many people, including the members of the Military Intelligence Division, in making sure it stayed quiet."

Yet, Finnegan said, Van Deman's belief that foreign subversion inspired dissent "helped create an atmosphere of repression and conformity which inevitably led to the excesses of the Red Scare after the war."

Those excesses extended beyond labor unions and Bolsheviks to include black Americans. Although the home front stayed quiet and black soldiers and their families proved their loyalty, Army spying against blacks not only continued, but accelerated in the years between the world wars.

After his retirement in September 1929, Van Deman set up a private security firm in San Diego, from which he operated a right-wing intelligence network, investigating Communists and black radicals.

He regularly shared information from his 85,000 files with Army intelligence officers who traveled from The Presidio in San Francisco to meet with him.

Van Deman's influence also extended beyond the Army.

In 1918, he introduced Clyde A. Tolson, a Baker aide, to a young Justice Department clerk: John Edgar Hoover, who in 1924 became head of the Bureau of Investigation, later the FBI.

Tolson left the War Department in 1928 to join the FBI. He became Hoover's No. 2 man by 1947, which he remained until Hoover's death in 1972.

Many Hoover scholars believe Tolson and his boss were lovers. Whatever their relationship, Tolson for 40 years would keep close contact with Army Intelligence, The Commercial Appeal's review of intelligence files shows.

Those intelligence documents provide clues to Hoover's unusual level of cooperation with Army Intelligence.

The FBI director, obsessed with turf and power, was no fan of the Office of Naval Intelligence, the oldest government espionage organization in the United States, or of the Central Intelligence Agency, with which he battled for control of spying inside the United States.

But Hoover and Van Deman, often through Tolson, regularly shared information on their dual obsessions — Negro and Communist agitators. Hoover continued to share information with the Army's intelligence branch long after Van Deman's retirement.



Luther Witzke